

# Philosophy of (De) Mystifying a ‘Line’: Political Economy of ‘Working out’ the Poverty Line in India

Satyajeet Nanda

Received: 23-03-2018; Accepted: 06-06-2018

## ABSTRACT

Generally in a typical societal process, population of a country or society may pass through transition (say, change in more simplified way) at any point of time, depending on current and/or past circumstances it gets exposed to. Be it personal or a matter of a group of people, individuals have tendency to respond to changes differently. And this differential of response to the same subject varies according to a variety of factors, such as, level of understanding, possible impact (insecurity) on own’s life, politics of benefits and loss and so on. Indian population with its unique heterogeneity and sensitivity varying by social and economic divisions has displayed these differentials frequently whenever any information is out in public. With the advent of periodic declarations of poverty data by previous Indian planning commission and by other current government bodies, typical and obvious reactions emerge frequently. Against these backdrops, this paper through a critique mode endeavours to systematically understand the nature and legacy of people’s reactions, the pathways and determinants of the same at different level of socio-economic development and possible outcomes there from.

**Keywords:** Citizen, Participation, Political philosophy, Poor, Estimation

## INTRODUCTION

As usual societal process, population of a country or society may pass through transition (say, change in more simplified way) at any point of time, depending

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Lead, Participatory Governance Programme, PAC, Bangalore, India  
Visiting Professor, Nirma University, SIT Tumkur  
Email id: nsatyajeet@gmail.com

on current and/or past circumstances it gets exposed to. Be it personal or a matter of a group of people, individuals have tendency to respond to changes differently. And this differential of response to the same subject varies according to a variety of factors such as level of understanding, possible impact (insecurity) on own's life, politics of benefits and loss and so on. Indian population with its unique heterogeneity and sensitivity varying by social and economic divisions has displayed these differentials frequently whenever any information is out in public. With the advent of periodic declarations of poverty data by previous Indian PC (planning commission) and by other current government bodies, typical and obvious reactions emerge frequently. Against these backdrops, this paper through a critique mode endeavours to systematically understand the nature and legacy of people's reactions, the pathways and determinants of the same at different level of socio-economic development and possible outcomes there from.

### **POVERTY: THE CONCEPTUAL AND CONTEXTUAL DRIFTS**

The concept of poverty has been defined and viewed by different people based on their own background. A more or less universal acceptance of this concept may be put as 'poverty is the situation that is perceived by the person(s) involved or its surroundings'. Karl Marx put this as '*...the reason for poverty and inequality lies in the market based capitalist economy and the fluctuation that all such economies periodically go through.*' While the Mahatma Gandhi visualize poverty as 'the worst form of violence', the economist Professor Dandekar views the aspects of poverty as "*... to examine policy alternatives, to emphasize that a massive transfer of income is essential if immediate relief is to be provided to the poor...*" and "*...how many people live how much below poverty line*". Contrast to all these visualizations, the Political philosophy school of thought perceives that '*...poverty is not created and recreated in a social vacuum, it is produced and reproduced through practices that are both relational and unequal...*' (Chandhoke, 2012). The contexts under which poverty operationalize itself can only decide the magnitude and nature of poverty. It could be the differential in awareness of the people about the situation of poverty, their level of sensitivity and their exposure to the social and political power to express/report the poverty situations to the concerned authority. In this school of thought (Majid, 2000; Chandhoke, 2012), poverty is seen from a wide spectrum as something that is much more than a simple lack of money

and (widely) relational rather than abstraction. The poverty can be relative or absolute in a way that the later is the absence of basic necessities, while the former represents the opportunity or conducive environment to use the presence of such necessities. Hence, the poverty is subjective rather than objective, comparative rather than isolation. Furtherance to the same, the concept of poverty need to be seen in terms of inequality (of wealth) and the implications. There are some theorists who discuss about the 'Culture of poverty' (Oscar, 1969) and 'poverty of culture' where by there is an explicit identification of people's characteristics (mostly behavioural) that is believed to be responsible for perpetuation of poverty. In the same line, UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) has constructed a Comprehensive Development Framework to identify what they call 'Extreme' poverty. Going beyond the numbers and objectification of human situations, the Political philosophers have brought out a broader perspective of 'poverty versus humanity', whereby 'to have' all the basic necessities of living is a part of the very humanity that states must provide to all their citizen (Chandhoke, 2012).

Besides the conceptual and contextual intricacies, poverty should also seen in terms of means versus the end whereby inequality may or may not necessarily lead to poverty. Often there are a number of factors inherently or contextually intertwined in such a way that the 'linkage' gives rise to a chicken-egg (Means and Ends theoretical paradox!) complex about the poverty. Poverty may lead to inequality through the production and reproduction of unequal social order susceptible to discrimination, exploitation and mass 'corruption' in a sense *when poor will have nothing to eat than the rich* ([funstoo.blogspot.in/2011/09/one-day-poor-will-have-nothing-left-to.html](http://funstoo.blogspot.in/2011/09/one-day-poor-will-have-nothing-left-to.html)). Poverty has a higher likelihood to lead to marginalization in terms of social, economic and behavioural aspects (Sen, 2001). There is a chance of 'value-shift' for the people under poverty situation, whereby valuables are forced to be perceived by self as well as others to be invaluable. There are also some structural and functional factors (barriers of society) that can lead to poverty (poverty of culture).

### **INTRICACIES OF THE ESTIMATION (POVERTY 'LINE')**

The PL (poverty line) calculation has been a regular exercise of most governments so as to work out different programmes distributed in such a way that poor citizens get reasonable share for a dignified livelihood. Similar

has been the case for the Indian government at centre as well as state level with specific strategies that varies by time and space. Specific PL estimation started in India during the Nineteenth century as part of revenue planning. During this time, the well known Indian economist Professor Dadabhai Naroji worked out subsistence-based poverty range for different category of people based on 1867–68 price of commodities that constituting mainly the diet prescribed for necessary nutrients such as 'rice or flour, dhal, mutton, vegetables, ghee, vegetable oil and salt'. He came up with a subsistence cost-based PL, ranging from Rupees 16 to Rupees 35 per capita per year in various regions of India (Rathish, 2012). Then, after the independence of India many other experts and commissions estimated the PL with some variations in methodology deemed appropriate. In 1971, Dandekar and Rath aimed to calculate 'how many people live how much below poverty line'. Thereafter, other committees such as Alagh committee (1978–79), Lakdawala committee (1989 and 1993) and most recent is the Tendulkar committee (2005 and 2009) worked out different poverty 'lines' with varying objectivity (Banerjee, 2012). All through these years, the experts have followed different mathematics with different logics and ended with contextual but objective figures of PL, which has more often not led to debates across various sections.

While exercising the Poverty Estimation, there has been a perpetuation of mistakes in terms of underestimations due to arbitrariness followed by different experts. In 1971 (base year for 1973–74), the cost of calorie consumption roughly standardized for rural and urban India was taken as base for poverty calculation. Till 1990, the PLs were adjusted again with some amount of arbitrariness with NAS (national accounts statistics) ratio, which is based only on certain consumptions rather than the ones considered in PC's estimate. This adjustment became extremely unreliable when there are major deviations between NAS and PC data. And these deviations continued across the years from 1960 to 1990 and 2005 to as large as two-third versus one-third. This happened due to differential in definition between NAS and PC with different timings, which still remains unexplained by most experts. Even the arbitrations continued in terms of the methodology of data collection that raises doubt about the reliability of the tools and validity of data. During 1993–94, the poverty estimation considered all expenses during last 30 days, which was called URP (uniform recall period) and was later considered irrelevant since many expenses do not happen during this short time period. Then the experts jumped to another method during 1999–2000 in the name of MRP (mixed

recall period) method based on expenses towards five low-frequency items spent during last 1 year and some others during 30 days. The definition of ‘low frequency’ items again remained largely arbitrary, biased and hence unclear. From Sixth plan till NSSO (National Sample Survey Organisation), 2004–05, the estimations were done from consumer expenditure information separately collected for the state and national level. These estimations showed the deviation from NAS data by one-third.

The recent experience has been relatively systematic but with some unclear variations in varying contexts. The Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002–2007) survey of the PC of India relied on degree of deprivation with respect to 13 parameters for calculation of BPL (below poverty line) for rural families in the country. For urban areas, it considered seven parameters with little similarity with those taken for rural areas. The scores for these parameters were constructed between 0 and 4. Based on this methodology, the families having less than 15 marks out of maximum 52 were defined as BPL. However, the State Governments are free to adopt any criteria/survey for state-level schemes (e.g., *Kerala takes 9 parameters, family which lack access to 4 or more parameters are classified as BPL*).

Recently, many discussions have taken place about the need to redefine the PL. The major arguments include: (a) change in the consumption behaviour since 1973–74 breaking the original link with calories, (b) the crude price adjustment levels, (c) the need to raise the PL so as to reflect rising income levels, and (d) inadequacy of the calorie norm criterion alone to define the PL (Manna, 2012). In view of the above, the PC set up the Tendulkar group to review the methodology for estimation of poverty which recommended changes in the existing procedures of official estimates of poverty. While defining the new PL, this new expert group ‘moves away’ from anchoring the PL to a calorie intake norm. However, while suggesting the new PL, it observes that for those near the proposed new PL in urban areas, actual observed calorie intake from 61st round of NSS is 1,776 calories per capita, which is very close to the revised calorie intake norm of 1,770 per capita per day currently recommended for India by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). The expert group also observes that the ‘actual calorie intake of those near the new PL in rural areas (1999 calories per capita) is higher than the FAO norm’. How far the quoted 1,770 calorie norm is valid for the Indian population by utilizing the FAO’s recommended energy requirements for

various categories of persons and applying those norms to the population distribution by age group and sex based on Census 2001, remains a big question.

### **TECHNICAL NITIGRITIES: SCIENCE BEHIND THE ART (BPL ESTIMATION)**

The exercise of estimating the PL or bar in India has been surrounded by a number of technical ambiguities. There have been frequent perceptual variations among different experts including the recent committee on the very concepts used for BPL calculation, such as needs, commodity, cost, expenditure vis-à-vis consumption. That too, whose perceptions need to be considered—the users or the experts- placed remote to the actual problem? As a great surprise to many, the 'consumer basket', one of most important variables used in BPL estimation exercise, has, however, continue to remain unchanged across time and space, even when there are intrinsic changes in the 'expense' items and economy over time. There is no clear and uniform definition and coverage of 'expenses' in terms of food or non-food, debt or loans, repayments and savings etc. These exercises have not captured the 'priority expenses' towards education, travel, entertainment, or may be the recent common cell phone and internet. Even this does not capture the expenses on lifestyle or health maintenance since people across economy groups are increasingly spending more money and time in lifestyle than the conventional health care. Again, the magnitude, quality and cost of commodities towards which money is spent may vary by people, geography, culture and contexts. Inflation on 'each' commodity and 'most used/spent' commodity should be considered during the estimation rather than aggregation. Same needs to be considered disaggregate by item, place and time. That's why a media post last reported a previous *Kerala CM saying Rs. 75 per day as basic requirement where as a coolie (Porter) in the same state says Rs.100 per day is the basic minimum requirement.*

Coming back to the mathematics of poverty estimation, it suffers both from perceptual arbitration and technical omissions. There are questions about the validity of extrapolations and interpolations that different experts have used ignoring the variation in time, contexts, states, geography and culture. That is how we have seen differences in estimates of NAS, PC and State Governments. There have been conflicting differentiations in use of terms

such as 'rural versus urban' or 'single' figure kilocalorie norm, requirement for 'light or sedentary activity', which lack objective definition uniformly acceptable across economy and geographic groups of Indian population. While the parameters are not defined properly, there are frequent uses of subjective terms as 'more' or 'less'. Experts are still not clear whether there should be a cut-off line or a range like the World Bank's \$1 and \$2 for poverty level, because people around both sides of the line may have similar living standard. Regarding the over dominance of experts on calorie norm, it is not only important to consider the calorie deprivation but also all kind of nutritional indicators, such as carbohydrate, protein, fat, vitamins and so on, to capture the balanced diet necessary for human body. Further there are visible disconnects between prescribed calorie intake, needs for a dignified life and estimated PL of the government of India. There are no any prescribed acceptable norms or standards for education or health status at the PL and all are put into 'miscellaneous items', which can underestimate important 'expenses' during PL exercise.

Both Tendulkar committee and other experts followed a lot of unexplained arbitration in terms of (wrong) base periods, different working categories of people vis-à-vis calorie consumption, the methodologies and sample size of surveys right from 1973 to 2004 to NSS 60<sup>th</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> rounds. For example, the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector saw BPL Indians as making up 77% of the population contrast to 45% of Tendulkar committee. The N.C. Saxena-headed BPL Expert group placed it at around 50%. Another 'biggest-ever study' of 30,000 households and more than 300 parameters (*people are more likely to die of fatigue than of poverty!!!*) reported completely different picture. There are variations by data quantity and quality due to shortcomings of the old methodology. Also the conceptual difference in understanding between consumptions and expenditure are not clear in many experts' exercises. For instance, the subsidies availed by the household should be subtracted from the total expenditure during the calculation. Similarly, for rural and urban data, the Tendulkar committee has followed different approaches for poverty estimation. While rural consumption data were updated on prevailing price, the urban data were not simultaneously revised, with an (unrealistic) assumption that the later is less controversial in nature. There have been lot of different types of adjustments, updating and extrapolations used by different committees, such as, use of fisher index (urban-rural, state-India), MRP and URP and so on, which, based on the

permeability of methodological frame/filter have generated varying results with little comparative options.

In addition to technical variations among experts, the differential in general understanding of the PL concepts by non-technical common people have lead to mystifications. While the BPL dwells on only the per capita expenditure for reported consumption and not income, still there are questions from some circle as *Do you know anyone who lives in a city and earns Rs 860/month?* In fact, as per some economist (KL Dutta in Menon and Dhasmana, 2012), there is a concept of 'economy of scale' against which *'the approach of looking at a day's requirement was basically wrong. There is something called economy of scale and when we look at these numbers, we don't look at a day's requirement but requirement of a household as a whole and for the whole month. So, it is wrong to say the poverty line is Rs 28 or 32. It has to be monthly per capita'*. Then comes that the static nature of the process of comparing variables across time for expenses, basket, needs etc. whereby the price index has been updated by only the inflation and no other structural changes in the economy and society. For instance, with the social change there are changes in expenditure pattern on different commodities, and cost of those commodities may change by context. A mere updating of PLs accounting only for inflation does not account for the changes in the intrinsic character of the consumption basket itself over time (Banerjee, 2012). Further, there are significant variations between weighted average versus actual retail market cost and standard calories value of food that the BPL is prescribed by the experts including PC of India.

The reference period used for expenditure of people also varied across surveys and for different commodity items, which have raised questions about possible recall lapse, reliability and validity issues. Similarly, the 'Norm-shifts' from calorie consumption to per capita expenditure and again to revised calorie used for BPL estimation yield problems of comparability over time and space. Particularly across the different years and states, the varying normative energy intakes has lead to temporally (and spatially) non-comparability of corresponding poverty estimates (Banerjee, 2012). We never know it is *old wine in new bottle OR new wine in old bottle!!* During the last 30 years of journey (1974–2004), the PL has suffered changes many times with a successive negative trend in terms of kilocalorie norms (Manna, 2012). There have been debates whether to use directly the variables such as consumption,

calorie norms and commodity baskets OR the indirect or standardized indices constructed from contextual factors such as economic and social vulnerability such as disability, old age, destitute etc., while estimating the poverty status. The wrong mathematics have not been able to capture the contextual costs of expenditure that may lead to economic marginalization. For instance, if a person in any circumstances spends more money to buy minimum kilocalorie of food, this may result into a reduction in expenditure on health or other needs or consumption less than the standard. This situation can lead to health hazards and the heightened expenditure on health seeking may throw the family into debt and marginalization on the needs beyond food. With the passage of time, the debt or marginalization for more and more basic needs can ultimately lead to manifold marginalization/multiple deprivation, even if the structure of the economy/cost remains constant ultimately resulting to a 'vicious cycle' of poverty.

### **NON-TECHNICAL ASPECTS: ART BEHIND THE SCIENCE**

While estimating poverty is largely viewed as a technical exercise, there are lots of non-technical issues surrounding this whole process. The perceptions and decision on need, spending, prioritization are all very individualistic, and variations ought to exist subjectively. This is where the non-technicalities begin their journey with significant impact on the result (BPL). Every time the PL declared in public, there are questions and debates about the authority and ethics of drawing the 'line' for the poor (only) and whether the 'real' stakeholders are involved in the exercise? Hence, there is a need to ensure the process is participatory and that too by all stakeholders and not the so-called 'key' ones. The official estimation of PL by PC of India never fulfilled this basic criterion which is the main reason why there is a lot of debate of varying nature from different circle. In fact, *Millions have been dragged above the PL, without knowing it* (Sainath, 2012). It is resonated across economists, sociologists and political philosophers that the Tendulkar committee calculation does not assure a healthy life and a life with dignity, by ignoring the fact that *'a higher dietary intake is required for maintaining a healthy life taking into account women and men perform hard physical labour'* particularly in Indian economy context. Seeing through the nature and frequency of changes in the techniques used for poverty estimation in India in last 5 decades, it gives an impression that there is a typical politics behind the methodological changes in calculating (drawing) the 'line'. Very

often, the mathematics is done differently by different 'experts' we never know by intention or ego. Moreover, these exercises are done only when the ruler change is expected or polls are on table, such as 1988, 1996, 2004, 2009 and 2012. In addition, there is an explicit endeavour to make propaganda or claiming communication by experts using subjective terms such as 'more' or 'less' poverty, massive/record, dramatic fall in poverty, lowest-ever, latest 'poverty line', extreme poverty and so on. For instance, a report says *Poverty declined by 1.5 percentage points per annum between 2004–05 and 2009–10. It is the 'fastest' decline of poverty compared to earlier periods (Dev, 2012)*. It raises questions whether 'intellectuals' such as some media, analysts among others are paid for the propaganda!

There is a clear variation in the consumption patterns of people (in rural India) at official PL and at poverty line corresponding to the calorie norms. This is because the official procedures have not taken into account the changes in consumption patterns with the modernization and urbanization. There are visible evidences of a kind of arrogance and incompetence in the process of sharing of the information of poverty by 'official experts' with the common public. For instance, the PC defends their view in the 'Supreme Court' towards ensuring the acceptance rather than any democratic process. Another important departure of this exercise is the varying interest of creating and using the PL by different people that lead to contextual and diverging outcomes. It varies from the point of view of research to politics, benchmarking, governance to entitlement and the list goes on. *While this does tell us the blinds' versions of four different kinds, it never gives us the real and full picture of an elephant*. In this connection, few also ask whether the official PL ensures a level of consumption above which people can live comfortably or it is just an exercise of poverty of culture that can at best perpetually maintain the culture of poverty? Some people even goes beyond a step further to find its relative space where the benefits and luxury of poor are foregone by the rich-world in terms of subsidies in corporate tax, costume/excise relaxations etc. This gives a vague impression about the existence of a possible linkage or 'nexus' between politics, technical persons and corporate behind the estimation exercise. The objective of all these discussions roots from the importance of cost-effectiveness of change in poverty (line), not only economic and political but also in terms of important socio-cultural consequences such as distress migration, family break ups, cultural conflicts and transformations.

## CRITIQUE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While India has made 'economic' progress in last several years and the sharp edges of (income) poverty have been blunted (to some extent) as a result of various policies and schemes (probably) of the Government for empowerment of the poor, at the same time, poverty estimates need to be reviewed in regular interval with reference to the (varying) basic needs of the people. The Government must recognize that any realistic estimate of poverty must be predicated (in a participatory manner) on earnings that can satisfy the basic human needs to ensure a life of dignity to all. Hence, it is necessary to understand the shift in expenditure from food to non-food items. Again, in the food basket, a shift is also observed from cereals to non-cereals. There is a need of restructuring by taking care of change of expenditure share among the commodities and increase in the costs of the 'priority' commodity(s) that lead to increase in total expense, based on which a higher (optimal) PL need to be worked out. Generally, the poverty is defined by researchers in two ways : the relative poverty which is bottom 10% or 20% or 30% of the population, who cannot participate in the 'desirable' patterns of life that exist in a given society at a given time; and the absolute poverty is the situation in which a person lacks those things that help to sustain human life (Mehta, 2004). It refers to the basic human needs, such as food, shelter and clothing. Generally, relative poverty is considered relevant for societies where everyone has attained a certain minimum level of living and people have higher aspirations from life. For a poor country like India, absolute poverty may be more relevant. The fact that the Tendulkar committee report revised the rural consumption basket to present-day prices and arbitrarily assumed the urban pattern remain unchanged 'thinking' as less controversial led to a huge jump in the number of people below the poverty line in rural areas, while numbers below the poverty line in urban areas remained almost unchanged.

Whether the PC of India should construct a static unrealistic 'line' or work out a realistic 'range' to estimate the real magnitude of poverty remains a big question for a number of reasons. The line has limitations, since people both side of the line may have similar level of living standard whereas range would frustrate the policy-mathematicians to stick to a cut-off for various purposes such as calculation, number and percentage of people below the level of

poverty, ease in entitlement plans and so on. Some critiques view this question as ...*There is no case whatsoever to construct a single poverty line based on a calorie or expenditure norm; all such lines are arbitrary and do not take into account the different dimensions of poverty.* On these debates some other critiques are, *The reason why calculating a poverty line is fraught with difficulties is because a poverty line is an absolute measure of a relative concept. So, no matter what number you choose for delineating the rich from the poor, it would be arbitrary at one level.* The deprivation, by its very nature, cannot be based on a single line and the problem of this deprivation has to be contextualized in the setting of the larger socio-economic imbalances existing in the society (Breman, 2010). Now, PL in India, along with the other related issues, has almost become a mysterious concept. This is primarily because there are too many people, who know too little about poverty, speaking too much about it.

Rather Political Philosophy school of thought suggest that there should be more research on 'missing outs and their root causes and find out the distinction between choice and circumstances to work on the actual poverty level. Also there is a need to find out the 'real' needs of people and their status in terms of cost, access, availability etc. In addition, some economists suggest that breaking the linkage of PL or level with entitlements such as making the PDS universal may to bring down the corruption, leakage and administration costs. There should be comprehensive programmes beyond the 'resource provision only' and focus on developing the affordability to use them. The poverty estimation exercise need to consider the actual expenditures on food, education and health and whole other 'current basic needs' required to ensure decent standards of consumption of these items. There should be universal understanding that it is the citizen's Right not to be poor. The rigorous debates across different circle of people gives rise to a new concept what is called as **Multidimensional Poverty Index** that can take care of many possible dimensions that have been missing in PC's (Planning Commission of India) poverty estimate. One very concrete step to ensure this is to formally work out the process of **Citizen's Participation in poverty estimation**. This has to have a full-ledged structure, process, periodicity and a clear 'time-line' within the planning cycle. This is particularly important because while tools like participatory poverty analysis exists (a number of studies across countries), the 'Citizen's Participation in Poverty Estimation' is almost non-existent.

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